CHAPTER SIX

THE GROUNDING OF ASSURANCE

Having analyzed Arminius’s critique of Reformed soteriology and, as he perceived it, its consequent errors with regard to the assurance of salvation, we may now turn to his positive doctrine of assurance. For, as should be evident by this point in the essay, underneath Arminius’s polemic there was a conception of God, creation, and salvation operating that was at many points similar to, yet at other key points quite distinct from, the Reformed theology of his contemporaries. It should also be evident that the issues on both sides of the questions are considerably more nuanced than much of the current literature has indicated. This chapter begins with a brief description of certainty in the context of Arminius’s religious epistemology in general. The next section will seek to describe Arminius’s solution to the primary problem of this study, the epistemological question of salvation, namely, “How can one know he is saved?” The grounds of assurance may be considered in two different modes, either a posteriori or a priori. We shall examine the question from these distinct angles and compare the solutions proposed by Arminius and his contemporaries, again employing the academic disputations of the Leiden theologians as indications of the agreements and disagreements.

I. Certainty

A. Certainty in General

In his oration on the certainty of sacred theology, Arminius begins with a concise overview of certitudo in general. “Therefore, certainty,” he says, “is a property of the mind or intellect, and a mode of cognition, according to which the mind knows (cognoscit) an object as it is, and knows itself to know it [the object] as it is (novit se id nosse prout est).” In

1 Arminius, Orationes tres, Oratio tertia, in Opera, p. 56; Works 1:375.
other words, certainty involves a second order knowing and is therefore properly concerned with epistemology. This certainty resides primarily in the intellect, which is the faculty that apprehends the object as true; for this reason, certitudo is distinguished from fiducia, which is primarily affective. Arminius’s definition of certitudo is in agreement with the standard scholastic definition of certainty as primarily intellective and secondarily affective.

Arminius then divides certainty into three types, corresponding to the causes that produce certainty in the mind. The first is the certainty of experience, which is when particular objects fall under the senses. The second type is the certainty of knowledge (scientiae), which is when general conclusions are deduced from known principia, that is, when objects fall under reason. The third type is the certainty of faith, which involves things that are remote from the senses or reason; this certainty is wrought by divine revelation. The certainty of theology falls under the certainty of faith, for it is based on the revelation of God’s word.

B. The Nature of the Certainty of Salvation

For the purposes of this essay, the main reason for noting Arminius’s general epistemology is simply to point out that there are degrees of certainty. Arminius does not specify under which type of certainty the assurance of salvation falls. He does, however, mention that certainty of salvation is not on an equal level with the certainty by which we know that there is a God or that Christ is the Savior of the world. The reason for this lesser assurance is that God is greater than our hearts, and he is the ultimate judge. It may also simply be that certainty of salvation is based on God’s existence and Christ’s work; therefore, certainty of salvation cannot be stronger than the foundation on which it is constructed.

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2 Cf. Dekker, Rijker, p. 43 n. 133: “Met andere woorden, Arminius geeft hier een nauwkeurige definitie van zekerheid in termen van tweede-orde kennis: zeker weten betekent dat je weet dat je iets weet.”

3 Altenstaig, Lexicon, p. 131.


5 Arminius, Orationes tres, Oratio tercia, in Opera, p. 60; Works 1:382.